

Turk Concerns With US Withdrawal From Iraq

By Ms. Karen Kaya, Civilian, Middle East Analyst, Foreign Military Studies Office

The pending withdrawal of all American troops by the end of 2011 is a cause for great concern in Turkey. Turkey fears that the eventual departure of US forces could exacerbate security problems in Iraq, jeopardize Iraq's territorial integrity and give the outlawed terrorist organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) a freer hand to attack Turkey.

The Issue of Territorial Integrity

Turkey's main concern has to do with the territorial integrity of Iraq. Ankara fears that the power vacuum that could emerge following the US withdrawal could spark sectarian and ethnic clashes in Iraq that could easily spill over to Turkey. There are numerous problems between different groups in Iraq, including between Shi'a and Sunnis and the Arabs and Kurds. All of these could be magnified once the US pulls out of Iraq. If an internal balance is not achieved in Iraq, Turkey, as a neighboring country, will not be spared from all the turmoil.

Turkey views Iraq through the prism of northern Iraq. The issue of northern Iraq is an existential issue for Turkey, for two reasons. First, Turkey perceives northern Iraq to be a safe haven for the PKK, which is a national security threat for Turkey. The PKK is a separatist violent terrorist organization recognized as such by the State Department, Turkey and the European Union, which launches attacks on Turkey. Second, an independent Kurdistan which would be formed in northern Iraq would be a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. Such an entity might embolden separatist aspirations within its own Kurdish population. With approximately 14 million Turkish Kurds, Turkey is home to the largest Kurdish population in the world.

The borders of the Middle East were drawn over former Ottoman territories. The British and French, as the victors of World War I, divided the Middle East and imposed a European nation-state system. Turkey's southern and southeastern frontiers were

drawn during the period when Iran, Iraq, Syria and Jordan emerged as new nation-states into the international system. Therefore any change in the composition of Iraq becomes an automatic concern for Turkey's territorial integrity.

Thus Turkey's ardent support for the territorial integrity of Iraq is actually a self-defensive position of defending its own borders. In fact, the recently released National Security Council statement, which identifies what the Turkish government's approach should be to fighting PKK terrorism, highlighted the strategic goal of Turkey as: "One nation, one flag, one country, one homeland." From Ankara's point of view, the strategic goal, in other words, is to protect the national and territorial integrity of the country.

The PKK and US Intelligence Support

Turkey credits US intelligence provided by reconnaissance planes with assisting in the fight against the PKK. Given that the PKK continues to launch attacks on targets in south eastern Turkey

from its bases in northern Iraq, this intelligence support remains critical. Turkey is concerned that once US troops withdraw from Iraq, the US will cease to provide intelligence regarding PKK activities. Without the daily satellite monitoring, it will become difficult for Turkey to follow PKK elements' activities, their internal fights, and where and how they get support. The US has flown the unarmed Predators from Iraqi bases since 2007 and shared the planes' surveillance information as part of a joint fight against the PKK. However, the drones that provide this intelligence are set to be withdrawn along with the rest of US forces by 31 December 2011.

As Turkish military and government officials often say, the PKK is to Turkey what Al-Qaida is to the US, or that "the PKK is Turkey's Al-Qaida." Aware of Turkish concerns, US State Department spokesman Michael Hammer has recently reiterated



that "Turkey is a long-standing ally and partner of the United States, and we continue to support Turkey in its struggle against PKK terrorism through various forms of cooperation," adding that "We support continued cooperation between Iraq and Turkey in combating the PKK, which is a common enemy of Turkey, Iraq and the United States." In fact, the US is currently considering a request from Turkey to base a fleet of Predator drones at the joint Incirlik base for counterterrorism operations to fight the PKK.

This is particularly important because elements of the PKK have launched an increasing number of attacks since August 2011, from their stronghold in the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq. They have escalated the violence and killed over 70 Turkish soldiers and policemen in the last few months. Following this, the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan declared that his patience had run out and ordered a wave of air strikes against PKK targets.

Based on its agreement with the US, Turkey is currently able to conduct air strikes against PKK targets. While Iraqi air space is under American military control, Turkish war planes have the freedom to bomb PKK targets in northern Iraq. However, once all US forces have left, the Iraqi government may try to restrict this freedom for the Turkish war planes.

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The Issue of Kirkuk

Kirkuk enters the equation within the framework of Turkish concerns of an independent Kurdistan. Turkey worries that Kirkuk will be incorporated into Kurdistan, and its oil will provide the economic infrastructure for a Kurdish state, further accelerating Iraq's disintegration. In addition, Turkey considers Kirkuk as a microcosm of Iraq, with its Kurds, Turkomans and Arabs. Turkey considers Turkomans to be its ethnic brethren and would like to

see a consensus based solution for Kirkuk that reflects its multi-ethnic, multilingual and multicultural identity. However, there is suspicion that Saddam changed the ethnic composition of Kirkuk to drive out the Turkomans.



Turkey openly credits US Predators and the flow of US data for its intelligence on PKK Targets inside Iraq.



The withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq at the end of the year has been the cause of debate in Turkey. There are serious concerns regarding Iraq's territorial integrity and fears that Turkey will face an uphill battle against the PKK. As many warn that Turkey may be on the brink of upsetting events, they also caution the US to plan its withdrawal very carefully, and to take note of Turkey's concerns in the process.

About the Author ...

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